



There isn't one thing that sets you off—there are dozens.

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM BURNOUT

If “stress” doesn’t even begin to describe your nonstop life, read this.

You could be heading toward burnout. Take a deep breath: There are simple, everyday solutions to feeling calmer and more in control. And you don’t even have to chuck it all and start fresh on another, quieter planet.

BY PAULA DERROW
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE VOORHES

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IT’S MONDAY MORNING. You’ve had a weekend to (ostensibly) unwind, yet when the alarm goes off, you don’t want to hit snooze. You want to throw your freaking phone across the room and barricade the door. The exhaustion is more than a lack of sleep—it feels mental, too, born from your never-ending to-do list. You’re not just stressed. You’re burnt out.

That term, *burnout*, has usually been associated with health-care professionals and others who toil in difficult, emotionally draining conditions. But in our overachieving era, with emails from the boss at 10 p.m., professional-level kids’ sports, and lack of wireless dead zones, that feeling of barely hanging on is rampant for other people, across all professions, too. “It’s clearly a cultural phenomenon,” says Christina Maslach, coauthor of one of the subject’s most widely respected books, *The Truth About Burnout*, and a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Why now? “Technology makes it much more likely that we’ll experience burnout,” says Alesandra Wall, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and life coach in San Diego. “Burnout is complex,” adds Paula Davis-Laack, author of *Addicted to Busy: Your Blueprint for Burnout Prevention*. “There isn’t one event that causes it: Work can spill over

to home and vice versa.” The economy factors in too, says Maslach. “There’s a real crunch in the workplace—fewer people being asked to do more work for less pay.”

Women are no strangers to excessive stress. “Women tend to be pulled in more directions than men are,” says Ron Epstein, M.D., a professor of family medicine, psychiatry, oncology, and nursing at the University of Rochester Medical Center and a leading expert in how to prevent burnout in health-care professionals. “And anyone who is giving, giving, giving and not getting much back is likely to reach a breaking point,” he says. A meta-analysis in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* found that in any group of 1,000 workers, 80 more women than men will experience emotional exhaustion—a small number, statistically speaking, but indicative of women’s willingness to go the extra mile. “As a clinical psychologist, I see so many women, mostly mothers, who come in feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and isolated from the demands of caring for their children, working, and taking on other roles and responsibilities,” says Claire Nicogossian, a clinical psychologist and the founder of momswellbeing.com.

/// ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM IT? ///

THERE ARE SOLUTIONS TO BURNOUT—and they don’t involve quitting your job or giving away your kids. First, though, it’s key to understand what it is: “Burnout develops when someone is dealing with a high level of stress but doesn’t have access to adequate resources, such as social support, helpful advice, feedback from friends or colleagues, or control over how they spend their time,” explains Arnold B. Bakker, Ph.D., a professor of work and organizational psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam who is one of the most prolific burnout researchers in the field. So what does that look like in *your* world?

People who are burnt out tend to experience three major symptoms. First, there’s the soul-crushing fatigue that goes on and on, however much you sleep. It’s a feeling Kelly Gurnett, 33, of Buffalo, NY, describes as hitting a wall—and not bouncing back. “I’m a writer, and the sole earner in my family. My husband has a chronic illness, and last year I was working from home, taking care of the house, being everything to everyone. I was going on fumes for months. Then suddenly, the fumes ran out. Any curveball in my day, like a client switching a deadline, would overwhelm me.” It’s no wonder: “When you’re exhausted and sleep-deprived, it’s harder to access good coping skills,” Nicogossian explains. “That’s when you find yourself snapping at your mate or kids, overeating, feeling too tired to do daily chores, or taking shortcuts at work.”

Gurnett also describes a kind of cynicism about life, another classic element of burnout. “It got to the point where I wasn’t excited at all about the things I once cared about, like posting on my blog, which had always been my passion project,” she says. You may start to notice that you feel disengaged from activities you loved, like hobbies or plans with friends, says Davis-Laack. “You unplug from things that used to give you joy.”

Even getting through your to-do list can, ironically, lead



That empty feeling, despite a way-too-full life: burnout.

to the third major component of burnout, which is a sense of inefficacy. “You feel like, ‘Man, I’m putting in all this effort, but I’m not seeing any results or getting any recognition,’” says Davis-Laack. Jocelyn Negron-Rios feels that way *daily*. Since she had her second child, the 37-year-old executive assistant’s responsibilities at work have increased, and her husband puts in lots of late nights and travels for business. “With my 11-year-old and the preteen drama, plus a 3-year-old who never stops moving, there are times I’m overwhelmed to the point of wanting to curl up in a closet and cry,” she says. “In fact, I’ve done exactly that, just to get some quiet time.” Even though she knows she’s accomplishing a lot, Negron-Rios often feels as if she doesn’t measure up. “I can’t truly be present with anyone because my mind is going in 50 million directions at once,” she frets. “I’m constantly thinking of what I have to do so all the balls I’m juggling don’t drop.”

Unlike garden-variety stress, burnout typically can’t be



Bring what you love to the forefront of your life.

having an impact. When he studied academic physicians, “the research suggested that they needed to like only 20 percent of what they did, on most days, to feel happy in their work,” says Epstein. That’s a number it can’t hurt for anyone to strive for. When you think about it, 20 percent isn’t that hard to achieve—it’s about 90 minutes in a typical eight-hour workday.

Kelly Gurnett, the Buffalo writer, upped the amount of her day that felt meaningful by “taking a hatchet” to any activity that wasn’t absolutely essential—and spending the extra time on things that brought her joy. “For so long, I was focused only on work that seemed ‘productive.’ Either it was billable or could be crossed off a to-do, like housework,” she says. “Now I let myself focus on things that are unproductive but that I care about. I’m a huge dog lover, so I foster dogs. I watch silly TV shows with my husband. I feel more relaxed and have more ideas, so it winds up helping the billable side of things, too.”

If cutting things out of your day feels less than realistic, think instead about the tasks you enjoy most and figure out ways to do *more* of those, however you can. Burnout experts and positive psychologists (who study what it takes to thrive) have a name for this kind of conscious tweaking of your routine: *job crafting*. “You basically change your job without leaving it,” explains Davis-Laack. And it’s a principle you can put into practice whether you spend your time in an office or your job is managing your home and family. Try reordering your daily to-do’s so you either begin or end with something you love, depending on what feels best for your own rhythms. If you’re a people person, you might decide to schedule meetings for early in the day, to get a jolt of energy. If you’re a teacher and you love numbers, maybe you want to save the math lesson for last and end on a high note. Either way, how you prioritize can make a difference in how you feel overall.

Shifting the balance of her weekly tasks helped Courtney, a 37-year-old social worker and mother of two (who doesn’t want to use her last name). Though she found her work—counseling very sick people and their families—meaningful, “the sadness of the job spilled over into the rest of my life,” she says. “It became hard for me to leave work at work.” So she decided to split her time between running support groups for people with cancer and leading groups for new mothers. Being with the new moms lifted her. “It really helped to have something that wasn’t about life and death,” she says. She also credits spending time with friends and colleagues, which helped her cope with her sadness.

Making connections with others that way, as well as being a bright spot for someone else, can increase your happiness. “Think about it: If you’re working at a cash register, you can re-envision your job and give yourself a goal of making customers’ days happier by smiling or saying a few nice words,” explains Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and author of *The Myths of Happiness*. A well-known anecdote from a study on job crafting found that hospital janitors who started their day by putting flowers in patients’ rooms felt much happier

and energetic. “The flowers had a huge, positive effect on patients, which in turn gave the janitors a boost of energy,” says Davis-Laack. In a similar vein, you might be able to get that boost by mentoring a younger coworker or bringing a mom friend with the blues a cup of coffee at the playground.

/// KEEPING YOURSELF SANE ///

MAKING TINY CHANGES IN YOUR THINKING and your daily habits can also make a huge difference in how you feel when the alarm goes off. “Learning how to notice small signals—a knot in your stomach, tension in your neck—then counteracting them with informal, mindful moments can go a long way,” says Epstein. In a 2012 study he coauthored, he found that doctors who learned to do mindful things like sharing a positive personal experience from their day with someone or tuning in to their emotions and physical sensations felt more engaged as they worked. What that means for those of us who aren’t M.D.’s: When you find yourself getting irritated at your kid for no reason, instead of plowing on to the next task, force yourself to pause. Take a deep breath. Acknowledge that you’re feeling stressed. Eventually, that mindfulness will become more automatic, and will keep you from feeling overwhelmed in the first place.

Granted, eking out time to relax is hard when your head is about to explode. Take baby steps: Instead of rolling out of bed, making coffee, checking email, and throwing in a load of laundry before hustling the kids off to school, keep your door closed for five minutes and write in a journal or do a few yoga poses. “Starting your day this way helps you get centered, which is when you’ll end up doing your best work,” says Joan Borysenko, Ph.D., author of *Fried: Why You Burn Out and How to Revive*. “Too many women say, ‘I can’t afford to *be*, because I’ve got stuff to *do!*’ But if you put yourself in a place where you’re not trying to do anything but be present, you’ll increase your level of brilliance.”

Hitting pause can give you the space, energy, and tools you need to figure out that it’s time for a change. “Women are running around so much that we don’t take the time to really back off and look at our lives,” says Borysenko. To avoid those closeted crying sessions, Negron-Rios says that every so often, she takes a step back. “I let the balls drop for a moment and get into a good book. Or I leave work at the office and vow not to log in after hours so I can really be at home.” That’s smart, says Epstein: “Making small commitments to do things for yourself that are mindful, like focusing on your lunch instead of looking at a computer screen while eating, can be more important for your state of mind than taking a weeklong vacation. Enjoy your lunch. Be in the present.”

It can also help to make a conscious effort to talk about experiences that have gone *well* in your day. “It’s the opposite of venting,” says Epstein. If you work, you could tell a coworker about a positive interaction you had with a client instead of piling on the complaints. For a frazzled mom,

WHAT’S YOUR BURNOUT RISK?

HERE’S HOW WE SEE IT:

If you’re extroverted, you may be... BURNOUT-PROTECTED /// Outgoing types are better able to resist the downward spiral of burnout, possibly because they get more support from friends, according to Arnold Bakker, Ph.D., a leading expert on burnout. Still, you might need alone time, too. Research also suggests that a dose of quiet can make you feel less spent. For instance, if you’re frazzled, take a 30-second walk down the hall, slip into an empty conference room, and do some work there.

If you’re a perfectionist, you may be...

BURNOUT-PRONE /// You might kick butt at a job but also find yourself hurtling toward the fryer. “If you’re always wanting to take on more, you’re likely to end up mentally exhausted,” says Ron Epstein, M.D. Try to recognize when your perfectionism isn’t helping (do you really need to triple-check a work email or fold your kid’s underwear?) and give yourself permission to back off.

If you identify too closely with what you do for a living, you may be...

BURNOUT-PRONE /// “What you do isn’t the totality of who you are,” says media mogul Arianna Huffington, author of *Thrive*. Make time for what you love outside the grind, whether that’s doing yoga, blogging, or making your friends laugh. “Confusing what you do with who you are,” says Huffington, “eventually leads to choices that are antithetical to flourishing.”

If you take steps to change a bad situation, you may be...

BURNOUT-PROTECTED /// “Engaged people change a situation at work or home when they don’t like it,” says Bakker. “That’s how they *stay* engaged.” That might mean asking to take on new tasks when a job gets boring, or asking friends for help when you’re feeling down.

that might mean telling a friend that you’ve finally gotten your child on a regular nap schedule, or recounting to your spouse the most adorable thing your kid did that day. The key is sharing those positive moments with people you trust, because research suggests that developing high-quality relationships is one of the best predictors of well-being. “If there are a few people you can talk with in an authentic way, you won’t feel as exhausted and drained,” Davis-Laack says.

In a culture where many of us feel like it’s normal to always have our game face on, to constantly be available (if not to a boss, then to our kids), making these kinds of mindful choices can feel like a huge challenge. But when it comes down to it, there’s no way you can be a good colleague, an effective worker, not to mention a caring person, if you don’t give yourself permission to do the things that are meaningful to *you*. Or to do nothing at all, at least for a few minutes a day. “Even if I feel I don’t have time, when I make myself go out with friends or pick up that book, somehow the chaos eases,” says Negron-Rios. You deserve that kind of peace too. Let yourself find it. ☪